GEISHA 101

The centuries-old tradition of geisha is one of Japan’s most recognized yet least understood cultural traditions. Geisha are professional entertainers and social companions, skilled in the arts of conversation, music, dance, literature and tea ceremony.

GEISHA TERMS

Geisha = Literally, “performing artist.” In Japanese, “gei” means art and “sha” means people or person.

Okiya = The house where geisha live. They do not entertain customers here.

Hanamachi = Literally, “flower towns,” or the districts where geisha houses are located. Today, hanamachi are primarily found in the cities of Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan.

Shikomi = The first stage of geisha training in Kyoto. Typically, girls served as maids in their okiya.

Minarai = The second stage of geisha training involving practical experience. Minarai no longer serve as maids and may attend parties, where they can learn skills through observing the other geisha. Minarai may only charge a partial price for their time.

Maiko = Kyoto dialect term for an apprentice geisha. Maiko is also the final of three stages of geisha training. Maiko are recognizable by their distinctive makeup, decorated hairstyle and colorful kimono dress. A maiko learns everything about the profession of geisha from her onê-san, shadowing her at engagements. This training stage can last for months to years before a woman is promoted to geiko.

Onê-san = Literally, “older sister,” or a geisha apprentice’s senior mentor. The onê-san picks the maiko’s professional name.

Geiko = The Kyoto dialect term for “geisha.” Geiko have completed each stage of geisha training and may charge full price for their time.

Danna = Geisha patron, typically an affluent man. Traditionally a danna was taken by geisha to help cover the profession’s large expenses.

HISTORY

Geisha trace their roots to female entertainers in 18th century Japan, although some believe their culture is linked to dancers and performers from the 11th century. In the 1920s and 30s, an estimated 80,000 women were geisha. Numbers have since declined for various reasons, including the Westernization of culture and the strict training and expense of the profession. The exact number of traditional Japanese geisha today is unknown, but estimates place it between 1,000 and 10,000 women.

TRAINING

In Kyoto, girls often begin their geisha training at a young age by joining an okiya, or geisha house. There are three stages of training: shikomi, minarai, and maiko. As shikomi, girls serve as house maids. Housekeeping (over)
duties are purposefully made difficult in “make or break” fashion. After passing an intense dance exam, shikomi become minarai.

*Minarai* no longer have chores, but rather focus on training in the field, where they learn skills such as light conversation and how to interact with guests. They usually are not invited to parties, but attend as guests of senior *geisha*. They can be hired, but may only charge a portion of the price of a full-fledged *geisha*. Girls are *minarai* for only a short period of time before they become *maiko*, or apprentice *geisha*.

*Maiko* intensely shadow a senior *geisha* mentor and teacher, or *oné-san*. The relationship between *maiko* and *oné-san* is extremely important. *Maiko* learn the arts of serving sake, clever conversation, and general comportment from their *oné-san*. An apprentice may be a *maiko* for months or years before becoming a *geiko*, or professional *geisha*.

*Geiko* may charge full price to attend parties or engagements. Traditionally, their time is measured by the burning of an incense stick.

In Tokyo, young women rarely go through a formal apprentice stage, instead becoming *geisha* in their twenties.

**LIFESTYLE**

*Geisha* are high-cultured, professional entertainers. They are skilled in conversation, dance, playing musical instruments, the ritual of the tea ceremony and more. Authentic *geisha* are paid for their social company at parties and other functions, often held at special restaurants known in Kyoto as “tea-houses.” *Geisha* are expected to remain single. Traditionally, wealthy men known as *danna*, or patrons, support a *geisha’s* training and other expenses, which can be very costly.

**APPEARANCE**

The appearance of Kyoto’s *maiko* is the one most often associated with *geisha*. *Maiko* always appear in public with the classic mask-like white makeup. Adult *geisha* also wear similar stylized makeup, but only for formal occasions.

*Geisha* wear beautiful, colorful *kimono*, or a traditional Japanese robe, with an ornate *obi* sash tied around the waist and knotted in the back. *Kimono* style and pattern are dependent upon the wearer’s age, the event and the season. On her feet are *tabi* (white socks split at the toe) and *zori* (flat-soled sandals). *Maiko* wear *okobo*, which are very tall wooden clogs.

When they wear their formal costume, *geisha* wear a wig done in a traditional style, with elaborate adornments such as combs and pins. At present, only *maiko* wear their own hair in traditional style. They must sleep using a neck support instead of a pillow, in order to keep their hairstyle perfectly in place.

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